MOTHER-FATHER-PARENT-GOD
Hosea 11:1-4
Romans 8:12-17
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All good theology is autobiography, someone said recently. The event which fixed this theological issue in my mind happened a long time ago, but it brought it into such sharp focus that I have not forgotten. It was my first year of ordained ministry. It was the first serious theological conversation I had with anyone outside the classroom. A young man in high school came to see me, announced that he had recently decided that he was an atheist and wondered if I had anything to say about that. There was more to it, of course. He talked about several concerns: some problems in school, some difficulties at home, and a sense of personal inadequacy. But what bothered him most was the fact that he had prayed long and hard: he had asked God to help him in some very specific ways, but he had not been helped. The problems, which had evoked his prayers, were still present. it is, of course, a basic theological quandry and I was ready for it. I said, "When you were a little boy and your were disappointed, or afraid, or hurt, your father took you on his lap and gave you a hug and a pat, and you were strengthened by his strength and healed by his love. Nothing about the situation which caused you such pain had been altered. The world was the same place. But your father's love had made you different. God the father is like that." I said, with the sophomoric certainty of one who does not know nearly as much as it sounds like he knows. I was, and still am, devastated by his response. He said... "I never sat on my father's lap. In fact, he never touched me. I guess that takes care of that, doesn't it."

The young man couldn't comprehend a God who cared for him personally. My attempt to use The metaphor of God's fatherhood to discuss it only made matters worse. You see, I had a father and I have a mother who knew how to love their children and did. What the young man in my first church taught me, however, was that there are definite limitations to the metaphors we use to discuss God. Twenty-some years ago it did not occur to me to move to a maternal, feminine metaphor in that conversation. Today it does.

The issue remains - and it is the fundamental issue. Is God personal? Is there anything about God which relates to me, individually, particularly. The late Paul Tillich was one of the major theological thinkers of our age. Tillich used to define faith as "ultimate concern", and then, with a thick German accent, talk about it uncomprehensibly. After one public lecture in which he discussed "faith as ultimate concern" at great length, he was approached by an elderly gentleman who said, "Dr. Tillich, what I worry about is not faith as ultimate concern but whether the ultimate is concerned about me." That is the issue.

Most religion has backed away from it. The Roman Lucretius wrote, "The very nature of divinity must necessarily enjoy immortal life in the deepest peace, far removed and separated from our troubles." (William Barclay, The Mind of Christ, p. 104)

"The gods of antiquity lived in remote majesty and had nothing to do with individual mortals. The philosophers, on the other hand, have discussed God in the safety of academic abstractions; God as the first cause, God as truth, God as the summum bonum, the ground of being."

The genius of our tradition is precisely that it portrays God in terms that are startlingly personal. Hans Kung writes: "From the first to the last pages of the Bible there is talk not only about God, but constantly to and with God, praising and complaining, begging, and protesting." (On Being a Christian, p. 304)

"The Judeo-Christian God is decidedly personal and the way the Bible often describes that God is by using parental imagery. The intimate God of the Bible is called father, but we are now either learning or admitting that there are equally, many feminine, maternal images of God in the Bible. Hosea II, that exquisite passage which was our first lesson this morning portrays a God who relates to Israel as a child, teaches the child to walk, nurtures the child, carries the child and, most significantly, leans over to feed the child. That sounds like a mother to me.

We miss a lot of what the Bible says about God if the only language we have with which to discuss the issue is masculine. The Bible, after all, contains an early and fundamental warning about idolatry, the attempt to define God in an image, a humanly created symbol. The symbol can be a carved totem - or it can be an idea, a word. The Biblical writers get nervous as soon as anyone claims to know very much about God. The trouble with idolatry is not that God doesn't like the pictures people create: it's just that as soon as you describe God with an image - you limit God. No one in history ever understood that more clearly than the ancient Jews. They wouldn't even pronounce the name of God - "Jahweh" - because of the danger of idolatry.

What we are learning from all of this is that what begins as an effort to describe the intimacy of God actually limits God. God is father: but if God is only father: if we cannot somehow conceive of God as mother, we have badly missed the point. A solely masculine God is as much an idol, in Biblical terms, as were the great earth - mother, fertility goddesses of the ancient Cannanite religion. David H. C. Read, pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, and a thoroughly moderate theologian, has written recently: "It is time we freed ourselves from the tyranny of conventional language and faced the fact that if God is really God, then his qualities and actions cannot be spoken of in exclusively masculine terms." (Unfinished Easter, p. 114)

Parenthetically, you and I need to learn a little grace on this issue. The English Bible, in fact, is full of masculine pronouns that are not there in the original languages. For example, in Psalm 22:9, when the Hebrew describes God as "the one who drew me from the womb" which is clearly a midwife image: that is, a woman, the English will simply superimpose a masculine pronoun that should not be there and the text will read, "he who drew me from the womb". It will not be easy but we need to learn the grace to accept the discomfort of any who feel deeply about the issue.

God, in the meantime, is not an abstraction. David Read is most helpful when he points out that we get off on the wrong foot as soon as we try to describe God, even though we must, by conjuring up nouns and pronouns. Our Jewish forebears, Read points out, used verbs more than nouns. God is known in the Bible by what he does. The Bible doesn't discuss the essence of God, but the mighty acts of God. Philosophy deals with the nature of God: faith is concerned with the activity of God.

The point of it all is that God's active relationship to us is personal, intimate. Jesus forever altered the issue by using a word to address God which is stunningly personal: "Abba", the Aramaic term which a little child would use to address his father, but only intimately, around the table; never in public. The term's masculine gender is totally overshadowed by its directness and simplicity and tender intimacy. It's only English equivalent is "Papa" - or more commonly "Daddy". That's how Jesus suggested God may be addressed: that's how intimate the relationship is.

Christianity is not the first religion to call God Father. Zeus was known in Greek mythology as the "father of the gods". Plato referred to the "creator and father of the universe". And many ancient religions focussed on the mysterious, awesome process of conception, gestation and birth, and characterized the deity as a Fertility Goddess.

Jesus alone, however, used terms which were dramatically intimate. When he called God father, he was deepening his people's understanding of the one who had created them, brought them out of Egypt, gave them the land and the law. He wasn't talking about sexuality of gender: he was talking about a reality so intimate it could only be addressed with the most personal language available. In Luke 15 Jesus tells three stories about God. The Pharisees and Scribes had been complaining about the company Jesus kept and he wanted to teach them something about God's personal love. And so he told them about a Good Shepherd who searches for one lost sheep until he finds it; and he told them about a father who loves his prodigal son; and, between those two stories, he told another about a woman who searches for one lost coin until she finds it. It did not occur to Jesus, apparently, that there was anything unusual about a feminine metaphor for God. What he wanted them to see was a new image of God's intimacy.

Think about the hints of that intimacy throughout scripture. The prophet, in the beloved Advent text, describing a Lord who carries lambs in his bosom and gently leads those who are with young...or Paul, struggling for words to describe this new reality to a group of cosmopolitan Roman Christians and finding that he could do no better than paraphrase Jesus..."When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ..." Or think, if you will, about that 33 year old young man, condemned, abandoned, stretched out on a cross, alone, dying, with God-knows-what closing in on his mind, summoning one last ounce of strength to cry out the most poignantly intimate affirmation: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

The point of it all is not a God who is a father or a mother - but a God whose relationship to us is so close we can use that language. The problem, of course, is that in order to use language which conveys that degree of intimacy, English forces our hand. "Our parent who art in heaven" ....."Dear heavenly parent" loses something, not just aesthetically but theologically. And so, we will continue to use the words we have known since childhood. But it is time now to use some others as well. finis

Near the end of his monumental work, Does God Exist, Professor Kung wrote: "He is not the God Marx, Neitzche, and Freud feared would be created in the image of kings and tyrants, of hierarchs and schoolmasters...He is the God of love...who commits himself unreservedly to us." (p. 675)

St. Augustine wrote, centuries ago, that "God loves us as if there were only one of us to love." That is the Good News in its simplicity and its profundity. It is, after all, not terribly difficult to speculate on God's love for the human race. But we are about to celebrate an event the meaning of which becomes quickly and dramatically personal. God did not send a philosophic thesis. God did not convey a working paper. God appeared in the birth of a child. That is the good news: it is also the dimension of the gospel with which we have serious trouble.

It means that God loves us, not in the abstract, but in our particularity, our radical individuality. It means that God loves us in our life situation, no matter what that happens to be. It means that the reality of God need not be removed from your life but affirmed within your life: that the love of God, while celebrated elegantly here in sacrament and stately ritual, is more honestly and authentically celebrated where we do our living and loving and working and playing and struggling and dying.

"Abba" - it is the Good News of a God who cares for the one who is lonely, and who has no one else to address and somehow finds the words to cry out - "O God, love me." It is the Good News of the God who knows and cares for the critically ill, the dying; the God who inhabits the high and holy places of the universe but more to the point, the hospital room, the surgery waiting lounge; the juvenile court, the county jail. Abba - Father: the God so personal that we can and should come with our dreams fulfilled or shattered: our relationships - healthy or broken: our victories - our defeats.

We approach the birth: a birth an angel announced to a group of shepherds. The significance of that event is global, universal, cosmic - but it is first and foremost exquisitely personal. "To you this day is born a Savior", the angel said: not to humanity in general, not to history, but to you - to me, personally. That is the Good News. Amen.

Lord God - Father, Mother, Loving Creator, we are grateful for love born in Bethlehem: for love which surrounds us each day; for love which adds joy and grace to our living. Bless us, gracious God, in the days ahead and help us prepare to welcome your son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.